

14. The Logic of the Gift: Reclaiming Indigenous Peoples' Philosophies

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Abstract: This chapter considers the notion of philosophy from the perspective of indigenous peoples. It starts by critically examining the concept of philosophy and expands it with the help of feminist and indigenous scholarship which have pointed out the exclusions and biases in Western philosophical conventions. The main argument of the chapter is that the notion of the gift is one of the structuring principles of many indigenous peoples' philosophies. The chapter suggests that the understanding of the world which foregrounds human relationship with the natural environment, common to many indigenous peoples, is manifested by the gift, whether give-back ceremonies and rituals or individual gifts given to the land as a recognition of its abundance and reinforcement of these relationships. **Key Words:** Sami culture, Indigenous philosophy, gift practices, feminism, Finno-Ugric peoples;

1. Introduction

Philosophy defies neat definitions – it is the *différance* par excellence. For centuries, it has been considered the monopoly of those peoples claiming the legacy of ancient Greece as their own and even as such, it effectively excluded women and their contributions. Indigenous peoples – viewed alternately as primitive, barbaric or noble savages by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Bacon and Rousseau – were not generally considered to have the capacity or inclination for philosophy.

Jacques Derrida (1982) argues that the violent hierarchy of oppositions is the founding moment of philosophy. For him, western metaphysics is inescapably dualistic in its structure and it interprets difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy. The hierarchical dualism and control of reason over nature have also contributed to the creation of the fault-line between the West (the sphere of reason) and indigenous peoples (the sphere of nature). As indigenous peoples were defined as nature, i.e., primitives without intellects or rationality, they were excluded from humanity and placed into the same category with other subordinates. While western knowledge is located within disciplines such as philosophy, history and literature, corresponding indigenous forms are denied the access in these academic subjects and

instead, are constrained within fields of anthropology, ethnography and folklore.

Val Plumwood (1993) has articulated a critique of reason that accounts for human domination and the domination of natural world. Her analysis of the systematic backgrounding of the natural world (and/or women) from accounts of history and economics is helpful to understand the mechanisms of exclusion that also apply to indigenous epistemes and assumptions of the world. These mechanisms have their roots in dualistic assumptions of reason emanating from classical Greek philosophy, particularly from Plato who is credited as the founder of the western philosophical tradition. Plato's (and consequently, other male philosophers') account of reason as masculine has been criticized by several feminist philosophers (e.g., Lloyd 1984; Irigaray 1985). Luce Irigaray examines the gestures of exclusion in the western tradition, focusing on the double exclusion of women from philosophy and society. Her central argument is that rationality in the western philosophical tradition is conceptualized as male and has its roots in dualistic structure and exclusion of the feminine. Plumwood argues, however, that

...it is not only a masculine identity as such which underlines the Platonic conception of reason and of the life of reason, but a master identity defined in terms of multiple exclusions, and in terms of domination not only of the feminine but also of the slave (which usually combines race, class and gender oppression), of the animal, and of the natural (Plumwood 1993: 72).

While some environmental theorists have interpreted Plato as an early environmentalist and represented the Greeks as having an organic worldview through the worship of ancient earth goddess Gaia, Plumwood (1993) points out how in *The Republic*, Plato considers the story of the earth as mother to be false yet belonging to the category of 'magnificent myths' which can be used by the ruling class to serve the social ends deemed worthy. Although the universe or cosmic nature might be glorified in Plato's accounts, his "thought systematically denigrates nature in the same way that it systematically denigrates women [...]" (Plumwood 1993: 86).

Rationalization is also employed to justify the privileged colonial position. A classic example of rationalization is the Aristotelian and Christian notions of a just war, a war of superior against inferiors which, many scholars argue, was the philosophical foundation of European conquest and subjugation of indigenous peoples (Hanke 1959; Wilmer 1993; Williams 1990).

Indigenous peoples and their worldviews, values, histories and conceptions of knowledge have been systematically excluded from western epistemologies and intellectual inquiries. Today, the legacy of this exclusion is reflected in views according to which indigenous theoretical and methodological practices are considered either a (unnecessary) supplement or having value only if they have something to offer to the western discourse. Although we now have Indigenous Studies programs at many universities, they still occupy a marginal position and remain in 'academic reservations'. As long as indigenous epistemologies are not recognized alongside with Western, mainstream or dominant epistemic conventions, indigenous scholars and their research will remain in a marginal, colonial position within intellectual inquiry.

In the process of dismantling the hegemony of Eurocentric intellectual and philosophical conventions and the privileging of western systems of knowledge, indigenous epistemologies have an important role of raising questions of relevant research regarding indigenous communities and contribute to our understanding of different ways of knowing and theorizing. This does not mean, however, a mere 'translation' of indigenous epistemologies into the language of western theories, but it requires that we consider and take seriously understandings and theorizing of the world by indigenous societies which may not necessarily be articulated in ways or forms that are conventionally considered 'theory' or 'philosophy'.

In other words, there is a need to see beyond Eurocentric structures and conventions of knowledge and put previous dualistic thinking aside that allows scholars and others to perceive indigenous societies and their practices only in ethnographic or folkloric terms. In this way, it is possible to grasp the multiple roots of philosophy and expand the scope of philosophical inquiry. Andrea Nye suggests that what characterizes philosophy throughout history is its continual self-questioning and self-renewal. She points out:

Often, self-questioning and redefinition have come from outside what is considered philosophy proper. ... The very insistence on what is 'real' or 'hardcore' philosophy against what is 'only' poetry, sociology, personal memoir, or politics itself renews the possibility of yet another philosophical reconstitution (Nye 2000: 102).

Feminist critiques of philosophy share many similarities with reconsiderations of hierarchies of knowledge by indigenous scholars. Feminist philosophers have called critical attention to several basic

assumptions of mainstream epistemologies constructed as neutral and value-free but which, after a closer scrutiny, turn out to be gendered as male. These presuppositions include:

- (1) That the subject of knowledge is an individual who is essentially identical to and substitutable with other individuals;
- (2) that the object of knowledge is a natural object known by propositional knowledge, expressed in the form of S-knows-that-p;
- (3) that objective knowledge is impartial and value free (Schott 2003: 56).

Like feminist philosophy, indigenous philosophies expose often the narrow conceptions of reason and rationality and emphasize their relation to social, cultural, and historical frameworks. Both indigenous and feminist epistemologies also ask questions of legitimacy: Whose knowledge is validated and on what grounds? Who gains and who loses when knowledge is validated and structured in certain ways?

Further, in a similar fashion to feminist epistemologies, indigenous epistemologies consider the knower as situated in his or her community and knowledge as rooted in and stemming from a specific location. Indigenous epistemologies recognize the significance of other than rational modes of knowing. Experience is also considered central in the process of producing and reproducing knowledge. As feminist epistemologies have argued, “objectivity is not jeopardized but strengthened by the contextualization of the practices of knowledge and its norms of justification” (Schott 2003: 56). It is also necessary to differentiate between having a system of knowledge rooted in experience and practice that has been accumulated over generations and describing one’s own experiences or limiting one’s inquiry to personal experience and expressive self-referentiality. Indigenous epistemologies are not based on an experience of one individual, but on what Marie Battiste calls ‘a collective cognitive experience’, established by combining personal experiences and sharing views within a community (Battiste 1996).

In other words, the intergenerational accumulation and communication of knowledge is central in indigenous epistemologies. Within an indigenous system of knowledge, the final decision of the validity and usefulness of knowledge is made jointly based on varied experiences of the community members. Indigenous knowledge is thus constituted in response to past circumstances and shared with other members of the community through language, oral tradition and ceremonies.

2. Indigenous Philosophies

If we look at the roots of the word 'philosophy', we find out that it translates from the ancient Greek as 'love of wisdom', thus implying a call for knowledge and questioning, learning and teaching. Philosophers examine ideas such as existence, ethics, truth and the nature of things (especially religion and science) – in general, they are curious about the world and human existence in it. The call for knowledge and understanding or learning and teaching are definitely not alien to indigenous peoples and although they may not have called these activities philosophy, they certainly have practiced them (and continue to practice) in many ways. This is echoed, for example, by the UN Special Rapporteur Erica-Irene Daes who asserts: "heritage of an indigenous people is not merely a collection of objects, stories and ceremonies, but a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity" (Daes 1994: para. 8). Indigenous languages may have not conceptualized generalized and abstract categories such as philosophy. This, however, does not mean that indigenous cultures have not been capable of philosophical thought and analysis (Krupat 1996: 17).

Indigenous thought and philosophies continue to be generally more holistic than Western philosophical conventions. Gregory Cajete notes that indigenous philosophy "is not based on rational thought alone but incorporates to the fullest degree all aspects of interactions of 'human in and of nature'" (Cajete 2000: 64). Indigenous philosophies consist of the lived practices and accompanied systems of values and perceptions of the world. Importantly, indigenous philosophies are particularly concerned of the human relationship *with* the world. As Tim Ingold suggests, in indigenous thought "the world is not an external domain of objects that I look *at*, or do things *to*, but is rather going on, or undergoing continuous generation, with me and around me" (Ingold 2000: 108). The kinship and interdependence with the world and all life forms is reflected in a common expression among North American indigenous peoples, that of 'all my relations'. Vine Deloria, Jr. argues that the phrase "describes the epistemology of the Indian worldview, providing the methodological basis for the gathering of information about the world" (Deloria 1999: 52).

In this chapter, I suggest that the notion of the gift is one of the structuring principles of many indigenous peoples' philosophies. The understanding of the world which foregrounds human relationship with the natural environment, common to many indigenous peoples, is manifested by the gift, whether give-back ceremonies and rituals or

individual gifts given to the land as a recognition of its abundance and reinforcement of these relationships. While these gift practices are often very different from one society and culture to another, the purpose of giving is usually alike: to acknowledge and renew the sense of kinship and coexistence with the world. There is also a difference between interpersonal gift practices and relations on the one hand and the giving to the land. My focus is on the latter as I believe it better reflects the ethos of indigenous worldviews – its primary values and conception of the place of human beings in the social and cosmic order – whereas the former (e.g., Sami *verdde* relations¹) has more to do with the political economy of the gift in traditional and contemporary societies. Although my examples of gift-oriented indigenous worldviews are limited here to the Sami people, many of the same values and principles can be found in other indigenous cultures as well.

3. Indigenous Peoples

According to estimates, there are 300 to 500 indigenous people in more than 70 countries on every continent. They represent over 5,000 languages and cultures, many of which are facing serious threats to their existence. ‘Indigenous peoples’ is generally considered to refer to distinct groups who are the living descendants of pre-conquest or pre-occupation inhabitants of lands and territories currently dominated and controlled by others. Not merely ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples remain in a colonial situation within or across the borders of nation-states that have not recognized their self-determination or sovereignty – a right which in international law belongs to ‘all peoples’ (see Anaya 1996).

The definition articulated in the Martinez Cobo study on indigenous populations (1983) emphasizes four main characteristics of indigenous peoples: the historical continuity of their societies on territories they have occupied and inhabited for generations, their distinctiveness from ‘mainstream’ or dominant societies, their current non-dominant status in relation to larger society and their desire and willingness to defend, protect, advance and pass on their identities, languages, cultural and social traditions, conventions and philosophies.² What is more, the concept of indigeneity (as it is used by indigenous people) is grounded on and inseparable from the contemporary politics and ramifications of the history of colonization.

The Sami are the indigenous people of Sápmi (Samiland), an area that spans from central Norway and Sweden through northern

Finland to the Kola Peninsula of Russia.³ A rough estimate of the Sami population is between 75,000 to 100,000, the majority of whom are in Norway, approximately 45,000. There are about 20,000 Sami in Sweden, 8,000 in Finland, and 2,000 in Russia. Faced with similar colonial practices of assimilation, expropriation of territories and eradication of languages and cultures as other indigenous peoples worldwide, the Sami have been engaged, particularly since the late 1960s, in a process of reclaiming their self-determination and rights to land, language and cultural heritage (see e.g., Gaski 1997; Helander and Kailo 1998; Lehtola 2002).

4. The Gift as Philosophy

The classic gift theories tend to view the gift as a mode of exchange imbued with obligations, counter-gifts, pay-backs, debts, forced reciprocity and other mandatory acts. These considerations are often grounded on an assumption according to which exchange is the primary structuring principle of society. This view is articulated particularly by Claude Lévi-Strauss for whom all societies are founded on various forms – kinship, economy, culture – of exchange.

The exchange framework also characterizes Marcel Mauss's influential essay on the gift (*Essai sur le don, forme archaïque de l'échange*, first published in 1924). His central thesis was that the gift is constituted by three obligations: giving, receiving and paying back. Existing within distinctive social rules, the gift is both constrained and interested even if it may first appear voluntary and disinterested. Unlike many other classic gift theories, however, Mauss's analysis was relatively free of the economic bias that sees the gift through the lens of mercantile interaction (cf. Godbout 1998).

Some feminist philosophers have questioned the conventional view of the gift as a form of exchange. Genevieve Vaughan (1997) suggests that there are two concurrent paradigms in contemporary society, those of the gift and exchange. The gift paradigm is characterized by giving in order to sustain and satisfy the needs of others. It is other-oriented whereas exchange, a constrained double gift, is characterized by self-interest: "The receiver is expected to give back to the giver an equivalent of what she has received" (Vaughan 1997: 49). Exchange is the basis of the patriarchal capitalist economy that seeks to maximize the profit by commodification and exploitation of the gifts of nature, women and other subordinate groups. The gift economy offers a viable alternative to the current economic model

characterized by values of domination, individualism and competition (Vaughan 2004: 17).⁴

I argue that as a central principle of many indigenous philosophies, the gift exceeds the realms of both economy and exchange. The gift is a reflection of a particular worldview characterized by a perception of the natural environment as a living entity which gives its gifts and abundance to people if it is treated with respect and gratitude (i.e., if certain responsibilities are observed). Central to this perception is that the world as a whole is constituted of an infinite web of relationships extended to and incorporated into the entire social condition of the individual. Social ties apply to everybody and everything, including the land. People are related to their physical and natural surroundings through genealogies, oral tradition and their personal and collective experiences pertaining to certain locations. Interrelatedness is also reflected in many indigenous systems of knowledge. These systems are often explained in terms of relations and arranged in a circular format consisting mostly or solely of sets of relationships seeking to explain phenomena.

The gift is the means by which the social order of indigenous societies is renewed and secured. The gift is the manifestation of reciprocity with the natural environment, reflecting the bond of dependence and respect toward the natural world. From this bond, certain responsibilities emerge. These responsibilities are observed through different ceremonies (e.g., giving to *sieidis*, the potlatch) and verbal and physical gestures of gratitude (e.g., the Iroquois Thanksgiving address). In this system, one does not give primarily in order to receive but to ensure the balance of the world on which the wellbeing of the entire social order is contingent. Thanks are given in the form of gifts to the guardians of the land that sustain human beings but the gifts are also given for a continued goodwill. Because, according to this worldview, human beings represent only one aspect of the creation, their view of the world is marked by a clear sense of responsibility toward other aspects with which the socio-cosmic order is shared and inhabited.

In order to discern the unique character of the gift, we need to look beyond the functions of the gift (cf. Godbout 1998: 129). The gift represents a system of values different from those of economic exchange, foregrounding the values of interdependence, reciprocity and responsibility toward others. This is not romanticization: the relationships indigenous peoples have forged with their environments for centuries are a consequence of the living off the land and the

dependency on its abundance. They are a result of a relatively straightforward understanding that the well-being of land is also the well-being of human beings. It is also important to distinguish between worldviews or philosophies and individual behavior. Elaborating indigenous worldviews and philosophical traditions does not suggest that these arguments and positions apply to every single indigenous individual in the world.

It is obvious that the long period of domination by various forms of colonial practices has eroded and changed indigenous philosophies and estranged many contemporary indigenous people from them. The Sami, for example, have experienced a very subtle colonial process which has resulted in a situation where only traces of the Sami philosophy are left, as many Sami have internalized and adapted to 'modern consciousness'. Quite naturally, we need to bear in mind that to discuss the Sami philosophy – a set of values, system of knowledge and worldview deriving from a distinct Sami understanding and interpretation of the world and its phenomena – does not imply its immutability throughout time.

Indigenous philosophies are not a question of mere 'cultural difference', nor does it mean that considering implies internally homogenous cultural entities congruent with certain groups. Indigenous philosophies refer to certain ways of knowing and understanding of the world which have been shaped and developed in the course of history by various indigenous peoples, including the Sami. This understanding has resulted in certain values, ethics, codes of behavior and practices of customary law that has guided individual Sami and the community as a whole in their lives and interactions with others as well as with the rest of the world. These values, ethics and practices form not only the foundation of Sami culture, but also an epistemology and a philosophy that continues to guide at least some Sami in some circumstances today.

To discuss Sami philosophy, then, is to reclaim Sami epistemological and philosophical histories and practices for contemporary contexts where the production of knowledge and reproduction of society take place. It is to decolonize structures and discourses that efface and deny the existence of these epistemological and philosophical conventions. This necessarily includes taking the historical context and the relations of power into account. There is indeed a need to address the epistemic displacement of the Sami and become more aware of the subtle forms of colonization that have become internalized during the hundreds of years of colonization and

today affect much of our basic assumptions and thinking. Lacking a critique of discursive practices of colonialism in particular, the dominant Sami discourse has not paid adequate attention to the gradual erasure of the Sami philosophy of the gift – the deeper structures such as values, worldviews, underlying assumptions and principles. As Sami scholars we have to both enter and know the struggles within a discourse and of multiple discourses in order to be able to examine critically the profound effects of colonial processes on us and our society.

5. Sami Philosophy of the Gift

Like many other indigenous worldviews, the traditional Sami perception of the world postulates that the land is a physical and spiritual entity of which humans are just one aspect. The relationship with the land is maintained by collective and individual rituals in which the gift and giving back are integral. The intimacy and interrelatedness is reflected in the way of communicating with various aspects of the land which often are addressed directly as relatives. For example, in the Sami language words for ‘earth’ and ‘mother’ derive from the same root (*eanan* and *eadni* respectively). The close connection to the natural realm is evident also in the permeable and indeterminate boundaries between the human and natural worlds. Skilled individuals can assume the form of an animal when needed and there are also stories about women marrying an animal (see e.g., Porsanger 2004).

The porosity of the boundary between the human and the non-human is sometimes seen as a reflection of shamanistic worldviews. In traditional Sami society, particularly *noaidis* – the spiritual leaders, healers and visionaries – were in contact with the spirit world where they traveled usually in an animal form. In a worldview in which survival and thus knowledge depend on the intimate connection with the world, this kind of transformation is not considered supernatural but rather, a normal part of life. An important part of this knowing is the awareness of one’s responsibilities and norms of behavior. As “[e]very geographical place was considered an entity in which the physical dimension was in balance with the spiritual one, [b]oth aspects needed to be taken into consideration when making a living” (Porsanger 2004: 153). The important role of gifts in maintaining this balance is echoed in a poem by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää:

We still did not erect our *lávvu* without the spirits’ permission
moved *lávvu* if it chanced to be placed on a trail

And when we left our winter camp
 we apologized if we had acted wrong
 and thanked the camp because it had fed us and our reindeer
 And when came to the summer camp
 some of us dressed in red *gáktis*
 adorned ourselves
 offered a libation as well to your light beautiful camp
 and asked it to open its embrace for protection once again
 (Valkeapää 1994: n.p.)

Traditionally, one of the most important ways to maintain relations and the socio-cosmic order has been the practice of honoring various *sieidis* with gifts. *Sieidis* are sites of thanking for the abundance of the land and giving back to various spirits that guard certain activities or spheres of life. Commonly they are rocks in their natural locations which sometimes are of unusual shape and color. Some *sieidis* were of wood, whether trees with the lowest branches removed, carved stumps or fallen trunks. The common location for *sieidis* are in the vicinity of sacred places, camp grounds or fishing and hunting sites. Particularly in the mountains, *sieidis* have also functioned as natural landmarks.

For the Sami, *sieidis* are considered alive although many ethnographers have interpreted them merely representing inert stones and structures. If treated appropriately, *sieidis* give fish, deer and other game, sometimes abundantly. Some *sieidis* also look after the reindeer. The abundance of the land and its gifts were recognized by giving the *sieidi* either a share of the catch, fish heads, antlers and bones or metal objects. Some *sieidis* were greased with fish oil or given an entire reindeer. *Sieidis* were regularly consulted and asked for advice before embarking on a hunting or fishing trip. They were also asked for health, safe travel and overall well-being (Itkonen 1948: 316).

Sieidis required regular attention and if neglected, the consequences could be drastic: a loss of subsistence luck, illness or at worst, death. Reindeer herding Sami held *sieidi* give back ceremonies particularly in the fall to thank for the summer and reindeer luck, and in the spring to ask for a successful calving season and a good summer. If the *sieidi* did not respond and fulfill its responsibilities in giving abundance, it was either abandoned or chastised. The gifts were taken away if the family or community had to move due to poor fishing or hunting. Sometimes a *sieidi* was chastised by chipping a sliver off from it and ceasing to give it gifts (Itkonen 1948: 318-19). Sami reindeer herder Johan Turi describes the nature of the *sieidi* in the early 20th century as follows:

Some *sieidis* were satisfied if they received antlers, and others were content with all the bones, which meant every single bone, even the most wee ones. Fish *sieidi* did not demand less than a half of the catch but then it directed to the nets as much fish as people could collect. Some *sieidis* wanted a whole reindeer which needed to be embellished with all kinds of decorations, cloth, threads, silver and gold (Turi 1987: 108, my translation).

It is interesting in Turi's description that the gift reindeer also had to be decorated. As Kira Van Deusen suggests, for some indigenous peoples such as those in the Amur region in Siberia, decoration and more broadly, aesthetics has its special function of protecting from bad spirits (Van Deusen 2001).

Particularly in ethnographic literature, *sieidi* gifts are almost invariably referred to as 'sacrifice' and usually defined as a gift exchange with gods and nature. As a forfeiture of something for the sake of receiving something else, sacrifice is not voluntary but given under certain pressures or conditions. Jacques Derrida notes:

Sacrifice will always be distinguished from the pure gift (if there is any). The sacrifice proposes an offering but only in the form of a destruction against which it exchanges, hopes for, or counts on a benefit, namely, a surplus-value or at least an amortization, a protection, and a security (Derrida 1992: 137).⁵

I argue that contrary to conventional interpretations, giving to *sieidi* cannot be completely understood through the concept of sacrifice. Even if *sieidi* gifts do have aspects of sacrifice, they are not and should not be regarded solely as such. They may have other dimensions that can be as significant – if not more – as the aspect of sacrifice. Bones are given back, the catch shared and reindeer given to the guardians and spirits of hunting, fishing and reindeer luck represented by *sieidi* sites as an expression of gratitude for their goodwill and for ensuring abundance also in the future. In this sense, giving to *sieidis* appears involuntary as it is done for the protection and security of both the individual and the community.

On the other hand, *sieidis* are considered an inseparable part of one's social order and thus it is an individual and collective responsibility to look after them. While it may appear that such a gift is an exchange and a mandatory forfeit (especially when interpreted from the framework of a foreign worldview), I suggest that it rather is a voluntary expression of a particular worldview that reflects the respect of and intimate relationship with the land. The Sami *sieidi* practices, like many other gift practices concretely contribute to the

well-being of an individual and a community. They represent a relation and constant engagement with the living world and keep its abundance in motion with the help of gifts.

Further, the Sami gift philosophy is apparent in the central role of the female divinities in giving the gift of life (to both human beings and domestic animals, mainly reindeer) and their connection to the land. This has been largely ignored in the analyses of Sami cosmology, reflecting patriarchal biases of ethnography and anthropology that have focused on representations of cultural and spiritual spheres typically belonging to men (cf. Hirvonen 1996; Trinh 1989). The Sami deity Máttaráhkká ('Ancestral Mother') with her three daughters Sáráhkka, Juksáhkka and Uksáhkka may well, however, signify the very foundation in the Sami cosmic order. These female deities of new life convey the soul of a child, create its body and also assist with menstruation, childbirth and protection of children (Ränk 1955). Máttaráhkká and her daughters thus personify the generative forces of the world: the procreation, giving birth and sustaining life.

Jacques Godbout and Alan Caillé suggest that fundamentally, "the gift is the condition *sine qua non* of all fertility". According to them, "[i]n a world populated only by autonomous powers that cannot be subjugated, except perhaps by trickery or seduction, *nothing is produced, everything must be given*" (Godbout 1998: 133). Drawing a difference between production (of goods) and (giving) gifts and stressing the act of giving as a primary structuring principle are important but it might not be entirely correct, however, to suggest that nothing is produced in gift-oriented societies. Perhaps more correctly, there is a strong emphasis on the gift relations between various autonomous powers that include the natural world and on the recognition that *the abundance is given* if those relations in and with the world are nourished. Another neglected aspect in scholarly and other considerations is Máttaráhkká's daughter Sáráhkka's role as a female creator of her own right. That her name originates from the Sami word 'sáret' meaning 'to create' remains obscured even in contemporary considerations of Sami cosmology and ontology, thus reflecting the continuance of patriarchal bias not only in research but also in society at large. Somewhat surprisingly, Lars Levi Laestadius (1800-1861), the founder of an evangelical, revivalist movement inside the Lutheran Church called Laestadianism,⁷ has recognized the significance of these female deities, noting that "because Akkas played a central role in Sami mythology, I guess I have to mention

examples of sacrifices given to them” (Laestadius 1994: 52). He quotes Jessen and writes that

...while eating, these Akkas were honored by water, wine and particularly by special porridge. Of these Akkas [...] Sáráhká, however, was the most important. Her place was by the fire and she was given especially drinks. Sami turned to her often in all of their activities. She was also given sacrifices without asking advice from the drum. [...] Women in labors drank Sáráhká's wine before giving birth and ate her porridge with other women; after the birth some arranged a feast in Sáráhká's honor (Jessen, cited in Laestadius 1994: 53, my translation).

As elsewhere, missionary work was the central means of the colonization of the Sami. The first churches in Samiland were built in the eleventh century although the influence of Christianity was not significant until the 17th century. With the aid of determined missionaries, Christianity gradually started to gain more foothold in the Sami territory and eroded the land-based spirituality by banning shamanistic ceremonies, executing the *noaidis*, burning and destroying the Sami drums and outlawing yoiking (*juoigan*), the Sami form of singing, chanting and communicating.

Christianity has also had a negative influence on general attitudes and perceptions of women in Sami society that continue to exist today. Since the mid-1800s, particularly Laestadianism has had a strong effect in Sami society. It has introduced certain concepts of female piety and humility in addition to common Christian dualistic notions of women as either good or evil.⁷ Christian religion and ideology has introduced a hierarchical understanding between genders, prioritizing men and resulting in low self-esteem of many Sami women (Juuso 1998; Lukkari 1998; Paltto 1998). This might also explain the relegation of Sami female deities to lesser significance within Sami society.

Emphasizing the life-giving values enables the reconnection with the generative, nurturing forces embodied in the Sami female guardian spirits. This, in turn, may facilitate healing from cultural alienation that is often manifested in forms of violence inflicted to other individuals or to oneself. Also in contemporary Sami society, there is a need to reclaim woman-positive perspectives and role models and critically rethink ‘traditions’ in ways that address the imbalance of patriarchal representations and asymmetrical gender relations (Eikjok 2000; Kuokkanen 2004). The revalorizing of the Sami female divinities and their autonomous, powerful character in the Sami cosmology provides representations of the feminine that can

contribute to undermine prevailing dualisms of gendered power relations in contemporary Sami society.

In the "atmosphere of gift" (Mauss 1990: 65), recognizing the gifts of the land and female spirits by giving back and sharing establishes a specific form of circulation. I call this gift reciprocity which has radically different ethos compared to mercantile reciprocity characterized by "the need to settle one's debts and to put an end to all debt" (Godbout 1998: 133). In gift reciprocity and mutuality, the ultimate goal is to secure the physical, social and spiritual well-being of the individual, community and the entire social order. The responsibility toward the 'other' that is embedded in the *sieidi* giving, for example, is mutual and is different from pure self-interest only interested in accumulation. Rather than accumulating wealth, the goal of gift reciprocity is to recognize and sustain the relationships in and with the world. The land itself as well as the spirits and guardians inhabiting and looking after it are considered equals that need to be respected and honored rather than endlessly exploited.

For some, however, indigenous people's gift practices with the nature may present nothing more than examples of 'primitive' or 'archaic' religions. To reduce the worldviews of the gift to mere obligatory practices of worshipping spirits of nature, however, is a gross misinterpretation of indigenous peoples' philosophies. I also argue that it is misleading to call the gift relations with the land a 'religion'. While practices of giving back to the land may have religious dimensions, they are better understood as specific ways of knowing, relating to, and being in the world. As the term 'religion' is closely associated with the institutionalized, monotheistic world religions, it carries with it understandings and connotations that may distort interpretations of indigenous peoples' practices and perceptions of the world. Instead of focusing on a transcendental search for a unity with God, indigenous peoples' spirituality is characterized by immanence. It permeates every aspect of daily life and existence. As Deloria puts it:

Formulas of faith were anathema to Indian societies. Debate over implications of the existence of God and creation of subtleties related to deity were unknown. The substantial doctrines developed by Christian theologians to explain, define, and control deity were never contemplated in Indian religious life. Religion was an undefined sphere of influence in tribal society (Deloria 1970: 106).

Deloria's analysis describes the context of traditional Sami society fairly well. Today, many Sami (like many other indigenous people) are devoted Christians which, however, does not mean that the Sami land-based worldview no longer exists. Although the several centuries' long influence of Christianity has severely eroded the Sami gift-giving to and sharing with the land by banning it as a pagan form of devil worshipping, there is a relatively large body of evidence that the practice of *sieidi* gifting is still practiced (see e.g., Kjellström 1987; also Juuso 1998). The continued existence of the Sami worldview even among some elderly Sami who identify with Christianity became also apparent in a recent case of Suttésája, a sacred site threatened to be turned into a water bottling plant (see Kuokkanen and Riihijärvi 2005).

Moreover, instead of talking of 'archaic societies',⁸ we need to look at the ways in which gift philosophies continue to characterize indigenous people's practices and to inform discursive practices in contemporary contexts (cf. Kuokkanen 2005). Among other things, the focus on archaic aspects leads to perpetuating both implicit and explicit assumptions of 'frozen' cultures and may reinforce false 'tradition vs. contemporary' binaries. As Hugh Brody reminds us, "[w]e are all contemporaries, whatever lands we live on and whatever heritage we rely on to do so. All human beings have been evolving for the same length of time" (Brody 2000: 7).

Most considerations of the gift that address the aspect of giving to the natural world at all only give meager attention to it. They are often imbued with assumptions of primitiveness, strangeness and antiquity. One of the reasons many scholars do not give non-Western systems of thought the serious and rigorous attention they do to Western counterparts is the common belief and insistence

...that non-Western peoples represent an earlier stage of their own cultural evolution – often that tribal cultures represent failed efforts to understand the natural world... Non-Western knowledge is believed to originate from primitive efforts to explain the mysterious universe. In this view, the alleged failure of primitive/tribal man [sic] to control nature mechanically is evidence of his ignorance and his inability to conceive of abstract general principles and concepts (Deloria 1996: 37).

One scholarly myth that has contributed to the evolutionary notion of the archaic gift is the argument first put forward by Mauss that the gift represents "a pre-market social system". There is, however, ample ethnographic evidence that the gift has co-existed with various types of market in 'traditional' societies, including those practicing the

'archetypal' gift practices like the *kula* (in Trobriand Island, Papua New Guinea) and the *potlatch* (in the North West Coast of North America). Moreover, as Lewis Hyde observes, in traditional societies "[t]here is trade, but the objects traded are not commodities" (Hyde 1983: 15). Also the Sami have held and gathered to markets, *márkan*, that besides trading goods, had a very important social function in people's annual cycles. These *márkans* were and are being held in specific times in certain towns close to trading routes for hundreds of years, the oldest on-going gathering being the Johkamohki (Jokkmokk) *márkan*, first held in the 16th century (Pulk 2005).

Further, classic gift theories are usually characterized by serious misinterpretations simply because the analysis is informed by the paradigms and thought of modernity that are incapable of adequately grasping the deeper meanings of gift giving to the land. Instead of viewing gift giving to gods and nature as a reflection of indigenous worldviews founded on active recognition of kinship relations that extend beyond the human realm, Mauss explains it as a "theory of sacrifice" in which people have – they *must* make – exchange contracts with the spirits of the dead and the gods who are the real owners of the world's wealth. Similarly, Laestadius utterly fails in considering the reasons for the ability of Sami *noaidis* to get in contact with the spirit world. Rather than seeing it as a characteristic of a worldview where detailed knowledge of and an intimate connection with the world is necessary for survival, he suggests the opposite; that it is the 'remoteness and other emptiness' that makes the 'uncivilized' person's imagination turn to the outside world (whereas a thinker or a poet is able to turn their imagination inward) (Laestadius 1994: 27-28). Embedded in the worldview of modernity that considers the natural world 'dead' and 'void,' Laestadius is not able to see that it is the very reverse of loneliness – the closeness with the natural environment and recognizing the importance of knowing (rather than radically altering) the environment that allows individuals to remain 'tuned in'. His interpretation is informed by a deficit model that has a tendency to dismiss spiritual phenomena as 'nothing but' a sign of mental instability and primitivity.

To conclude, I return to the question of why I have insisted that indigenous peoples' worldviews of the gift amount to philosophy. I have proposed that the gift constitutes a specific logic that is radically different from the logic of exchange. This logic foregrounds the inter-related character of the world and the active recognition of the gifts of the land. It is manifested through different practices of giving, sharing

and acknowledging that range from individual acts in daily life to communal feasts and ceremonies held at special occasions. These gift practices are not mere ‘mechanical interlockings of obligatory practices’ as suggested by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1997: 198) but are grounded on a specific philosophy – a system of values, knowledge and understanding of the world – that sustains the socio-cosmic order and balance necessary for the well-being of everybody and everything. The kinship with the world also forms the ethical basis of indigenous philosophies, articulating a set of principles (i.e., customary law) according to which individuals, communities and societies were expected to conduct their lives (e.g., Borrows 2002; Deloria 1999; LaRocque 2001).

To consider indigenous gift paradigms as philosophies is also to call attention not only to biased interpretations of gift practices as ‘archaic’ or ‘primitive’ but to Eurocentric thinking according to which philosophy and philosophical thought is reserved only for certain peoples and traditions, while the rest of us can settle for mythology, folklore and (ethnic) cultures. What is more, Derrida contends that philosophy has never been tied to one single language, memory, place or people: “Under its Greek name and its European memory, it has always been bastard, hybrid, grafted, multilinear, and polyglot” (Derrida 2002: 10).

Discussing indigenous gift-oriented worldviews and the logic of the gift as philosophies may not be so much a matter of re-ethnicizing minds as an act of indigenous people reclaiming their systems of knowledge and rejecting categories and labels from outside.⁹ This and other forms of on-going endeavors of decolonizing knowledge and perceptions of the world also recognize the power of naming and the right to redefine concepts according to the needs and preferences of indigenous people themselves.

Concepts such as ‘indigenous philosophy’ or ‘indigenous science’ might not have always existed in indigenous languages but they are employed today, for instance, in order to make contributions of indigenous peoples more visible to mainstream society or to bridge understandings between indigenous and mainstream or Western systems of knowledge (cf. Colorado 1996).¹⁰ The gift of indigenous philosophies is not found only in the challenges it poses to conventional conceptualizations of philosophy, but perhaps even more importantly, in the alternative logic and vision it offers to today’s global economic order and its values. Indigenous peoples are among those in the world who are most drastically affected by the extension

of the global capitalist markets, ever-intensifying exploitation of natural resources (that usually are found in their traditional territories) and cheapening of labor, these destructive processes are radically limiting and decreasing the quality of life for others on the planet as well. Denouncing dependence from our natural environment and assuming that individual freedom is achieved by domination, as has been the tradition of mainstream Western scientific paradigm established by Bacon and his followers, is not only utopian but also very dangerous in its short-sightedness and arrogance. The evident destruction of ecosystems, biocultural diversity and livable environments is already resulting in escalating instability and violence in the world. Learning from indigenous gift philosophies, however, cannot be interpreted as a license to political or spiritual abuse of 'indigenous people as nature' or appropriation of their epistemologies.

Appropriating indigenous philosophies or spiritualities as models for sustainability raises several potential problems. First, discussing indigenous worldviews without recognizing the effects of various colonization processes ossifies them into the archaic past that also plagues some of the considerations of the gift. Second, there is a danger of simplification of these values and practices once they are detached from their social, political and cultural contexts. Finally, failing to consider how indigenous philosophies were negated, suppressed and inferiorized by white settlers and denied by the establishment (and enforcement) of modern values denies the Western complicity in this process. A flight to the unproblematized and conflict-free past, the avoidance of present realities of all parties and the ways in which the injustices of the past continue in our present cannot offer solutions that are required for a sustainable change (or for that matter, a sustainable future). As Andy Smith suggests, many environmental and ecofeminist movements pay tribute to indigenous peoples and their land-centered ways of life, use them as inspirational symbols and quote them but decline to join the struggle for survival of these peoples or "do not adequately discuss the material conditions in which Indian people live, how these conditions affect non-Indians, and what strategies we can employ to stop the genocide of Indian people and end the destructive forms of resource development on Indian land" (Smith 1997: 30). To learn from indigenous peoples philosophies of the gift necessitates, first and foremost, practicing and engaging with the very principles of the gift – establishing and sustaining continuous relationships for the well-being of all.

Notes:

1. *Verddevuohta* refers to relations between reindeer herding and sedentary Sami families based on mutual friendship and trading of goods of their specific livelihood.
2. Another working definition commonly referred to is found in the International Labors Organization's Convention 169 (1989).
3. Previously called as the Lapps or Laplanders by outsiders, the Sami have claimed their right for their own collective term deriving from their own languages (*sápmela^a* in Northern Sami). Moreover, the terms 'Lapp' or 'Laplander' is usually considered negative and derogative.
4. For an extensive analysis of the gift economy as a practice of other-orientation based on the principle and values of mothering, see (Vaughan 1997; 2002; 2004). The gift economy and paradigm is further elaborated by the International Feminist Network for the Gift Economy established in 2001.
5. Derrida's analysis of the gift is too extensive and complex to delve further in this context. I have engaged with his considerations in (Kuokkanen 2004).
6. Laestadius was of South Sami ancestry and he traveled across Samiland preaching and delivering his healing sermons, which partly drew upon Sami culture and oral traditions. Laestadianism has had a particularly strong effect in Sami society. It has introduced certain concepts of female piety and humility in addition to common Christian dualistic notions of women as either good or evil. A central characteristic of the Laestadian faith is the confession of sins followed by absolution 'in the name and blood of Jesus'. Laestadianism requires an abstinence from alcohol and disapproval of contraception.
7. Such perceptions of women are evident, for example, in some of the works of Sami writers (e.g., Guttorm 1998). In her collection of short stories *Guovt-teoaivat nisu* ("Two-Headed Woman"), Kirsti Paltto (Paltto 1989) analyzes common images and representations of Sami women in a society strongly influenced by Christianity (see Poikajärvi 1996).
8. Various gift practices related to nature are often assigned to belonging only to traditional indigenous societies (or what anthropologists in particular but also others are inclined to call 'archaic') and thus something that does not describe current realities of indigenous peoples. Even many scholars otherwise critical of the narrow interpretations of the gift as economic exchange refer to indigenous and other non-Western societies as 'archaic'.
9. Representatives of indigenous peoples have repeatedly pointed out that they are not ethnic minorities though they can be racialized and numerical minorities in certain contexts. James Anaya, for example, writes: "While rights of cultural integrity outside the specific context of indigenous peoples have been associated with 'minority rights', indigenous rights advocates have frequently rejected

calling indigenous groups minorities in their attempts to establish indigenous people within a separate regime with greater legal entitlements” (Anaya 1996: 99).

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